

It's Radio Comedy, But Jack Benny It

By JEFF GREENFIELD

WELL, friends, we've come to a pretty pass indeed when a newspaper like The New York Times sends a good-natured, well-intentioned journalist into a cistern of licentiousness, subversion and filth, but that is exactly what has happened to me, and let me tell you, after checking out the so-called National Lampoon's so-called "Radio Hour" of so-called weekly comedy, I'm ready for a good, hot bath and a visit to my FBI field office.

I mean, have you any idea what they're doing in that radio studio over there at 59th and Madison? Isn't it bad enough that this magazine, with its pictures of meat and dead people and its insult to our diverse ethnic origins, sells 850,000 copies every month and nets about \$2-million a year? Do you realize that already, after barely two months on the air, this "Radio Hour" is on more than 100 stations all over America, with WRVR-FM—a church-owned station, for heaven's sake—carrying this compost heap into our homes every Saturday night at 7:30?

O.K., O.K., I'll be calm. But, hey, they ran something called "Chit Chat With Pat," in which Mrs. Nixon — the wife of the President—is giving advice to teen-agers. I admit I was fooled for a second by her wise remark that heavy petting "causes hives, ritual murder, and poor marks," but then I realized

Jeff Greenfield is a freelance writer with five radios in his home.

that it wasn't Pat Nixon at all. They had hired an actress to imitate her!

That's not all, oh no, far from it. Just like Orwell wrote in his wonderful book, "\$19.84," these people are rewriting history — and everything else. They have concocted a "Child's Christmas in Ulster," with a Dylan Thomas-evocation of Protestant children gleefully "waiting to clobber the Catholics." They've done a production of "Waiting for Godot" which

Nothing is sacred to the zanies of the National Lampoon's 'Radio Hour.'

isn't even the real play! ("Oh, there's Godot." "Hi, guys, sorry I'm late, but the damn bus didn't come and I had to take a cab . . . Say, putting on a little weight aren't you?")

Funny? Bob Hope, that's funny; Shelley Berman talking about realizing you've got a piece of spinach on your teeth, that's funny; but what is funny about announcing that "the end of the world is going to come Thursday at 4:30 P.M. Alternate side of the street parking will be suspended"? Can you think of a better way to tie up traffic in our streets and immobilize our defense capacity? Believe

me, the only folks chuckling at the "Radio Hour" are the boys laughing it up in the Kremlin.

It would be bad enough if this conspiracy had been hatched in some beatnik loft by sweatshirted, swarthy young people. But the man who thought up the idea for the radio show, the man who runs the company that publishes the Lampoon, is a graying, 47-year-old executive named Matty Simmons, who does perfectly respectable things like publishing Weight Watchers and New Ingenu magazines. (He used to run Diners' Club, which I now believe was nothing but a plot to drive American businessmen into debt.)

"We know our market," Simmons said, apparently not realizing I was taking down every word. "We concentrate on the college-age market, and the principal way to reach that market is radio, chiefly progressive-rock FM radio. Michael O'Donoghue, one of our senior editors, had just finished editing the enormously successful 'Encyclopedia of Humor' and he'd co-created the 'Radio Dinner' album, so I told him, 'We're gonna do a radio show and you're gonna be the editor.'" It took 90 days from inception to air date, which, you will note, is exactly the same time span used by Germany to conquer Poland!

As for O'Donoghue, I must admit I was surprised at his ethnic origins, his sport jacket, and his tie, but when I saw he was also wearing blue jeans and a beard, everything fell into place. I also

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Contributing to the National Lampoon's "Comedy Hour" upper left, editor Michael O'Donoghue, actors Christ

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learned he'd been thrown out of the University of Rochester, and wrote for the Evergreen Review, which featured both nudity and Justice Douglas at the same time!

"I remember old-time radio," O'Donoghue sneered, sniffing white powder from a tiny, rolled-up American flag. "In the fifties I used to dream of doing a show on radio, but it seemed impossible, like dreaming of the telegraph or the Pony Express."

I started to ask him about how long he'd been trained in a secret camp in the Urals, but somehow he wanted to talk about the blessed moments of calm that settle over the show, like when they take an idea that should go one minute and stretch it out for five, or seven, or an hour, and, I hope, drive every listener away.

"I'm not going to defend the show," O'Donoghue said, kicking a kitten, "it's still very hit and miss. We're wildly understaffed and we produce everything a little long. We've gotta get better. But we're doing it, we're on the air. And I think that's a lot better than the hissssss of nothing. And when we get more equipment, we'll be able to draw on a lot more possibilities."

You know what this means? The Lampoon is already spending \$5,000 a week on the show, including the cost of building a "National Lampoon Radio Ranch" studio, so our children can go to these shows and laugh at Gene Autry and Roy Rogers and the great job they did winning World War II. They have already got radio veterans Pat Bright and Bob Dryden doing some of the voices, as well as "comrades in arms" (if you get my meaning) from the "Lemmings" revue and from the magazine—people like Alice Playten, John Belushi, Chevy Chase and Christopher Guest. And editors and writers are churning out this Lampoonography which defames the Nixons, Ralph Nader, ani-

mals, and oil companies. And now they're planning even more.

"Sure we've got a long way to go," O'Donoghue concedes. "We want to do more themes, to be more playful. And we have to be a comedy hour of the 1970's, not of 1946. But I've got an idea that if the show gets too good, it won't be as effective as it is now. One of the reasons the magazine succeeded is that we screw around; we say, 'O.K., it isn't that great, but let's run it.' I don't want to get too slick, too precise."

You know what Matty Simmons told me? To my face? He said, "There's no such

thing as poor taste if it's funny. We have to be totally irreverent. We have to go after everybody."

Now listen, I've got an idea. This Saturday, I want every one of you to turn this show on and then, all at the same time, say 7:48, I want you all to yell into the radio, "O.K., O'Donoghue—we've got you surrounded! Give up!" Yes, I want to organize the first citizen's band arrest in radio history. Extremism? I say, either we stop them now or the next thing you know, they'll be taking over John Gambling and our Way of Life will be destroyed forever.